

GEOPHYSICAL VARIABLES AND BEHAVIOR: XC. WHAT PEOPLE CONSIDER STRANGE: CHANGE IN PROPORTIONS OF REPORTS OF FORTEAN PHENOMENA OVER TIME¹

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Summary.—The proportions of 3,667 reports classified as unusual or odd events within eight major categories for four contiguous blocks of time between 1770 and 1970 were compared for disconcordance. The major source of the disconcordance ($\phi = .52$) of reports between the major categories and time was due to the decrease in the numbers of reports of falls of ice, rocks, and animals but increased numbers of reports of odd luminosities, labelled as unidentified flying objects, after the mid 1930s. One hypothesis to explain this result is that cultural changes in attributions for causes of natural phenomena may affect their designation as strange rather than mundane.

When experiences are not consistent with shared expectancies from beliefs, theories, or perceptual constancies, they are considered anomalous, strange, and even anxiogenic. Fortean events, named after Charles Fort, can be considered as reports of such anomalous phenomena. The present analysis was designed to discern whether the reports of the different proportions of Fortean events have changed during the last approximately 200 years. The numbers of reports classified as “falls” (reports of falls of fish, rocks, or ice from the sky), electromagnetic oddities (earthquake lights, ghost lights, electromagnetic communication quirks), sonic peculiarities (odd explosions), strange luminosities (balls of light with anomalous trajectories), bizarre human events (poltergeists, “human combustion”), animals in inappropriate places (“panthers” or “extinct animals” walking through the yards of suburban areas), astronomical changes (sudden alteration in magnitude of a star, transient lunar phenomena), and archeological contradictions (allegedly manufactured objects found in rock millions of years old) were extracted from our data base (Persinger & Lafreniere, 1977).

The numbers of events in each category for the years 1770–1883 ($n = 819$), 1884–1935 ($n = 1,032$), 1936–1959 ($n = 1,006$), and 1960–1970 ($n = 810$), were extracted. These yearly increments were selected on the basis of their comparable numbers of events. The percentage of events within each of the eight categories are shown in Table 1. Chi-squared analyses indicated a significant disproportion [$\chi^2(N=21) = 1007.12$, $p < .001$; $\phi = .52$] of frequencies between categories and temporal blocks.

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TABLE 1
PROPORTIONS (PERCENTAGES) OF EVENTS CLASSIFIED WITHIN THE DIFFERENT
CATEGORIES FOR EACH OF FOUR BLOCKS OF YEARS FOR 3,667 REPORTS

Category	1770-1883	1884-1935	1936-1959	1960-1970
Ice, Fish Falls	39	23	9	9
Electromagnetic	2	5	6	5
Sonic Phenomena	5	5	2	2
Luminosities	11	19	53	38
Odd Human Events	6	16	10	8
Odd Animals/Behavior	9	12	12	27
Astronomical Oddities	24	17	4	6
Archaeological Oddities	4	3	4	5

Post hoc analysis indicated that most of the changes over time were due to the increased numbers of reports of strange events classified as odd luminous phenomena (primary reports of unidentified flying objects) but decreased numbers of reports of falling events after the mid 1930s. Given there has not been an altered bias in the reporting of subclasses of events, these results would be consistent with the hypothesis that changes in attribution, a cognitive process strongly influenced by cultural beliefs and expectancy, changed after that time. Odd falling objects may now be attributed to mundane passing aircraft. Transient lunar phenomena and "canals" on Mars have lost their lustre because telescopes with greater resolution revealed the mediocre. On the other hand, balls of light in the sky, once explained as supernatural forces, may now be attributed to alien intelligence because of shifts in the default explanations for these phenomena. However, the actual or absolute incidence for the events in any of these categories may not have changed.

REFERENCE

- PERSINGER, M. A., & LAFRENIERE, G. F. (1977) *Space-time transients and unusual events*. Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall.

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